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Title: The American Sign Language Program at the University of Illinois and What It Says About the University's Views Towards the Deaf

About the Author:

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Abstract: My research centers on the development of the American Sign Language program at the University of Illinois. It discusses why the program was developed, ASL as a foreign language compared to other speaking language offered on campus, the difference between ASL and signed English, and the incorporation of deaf culture into the program. In my research I used items from the main archives, newspaper articles from the Daily Illini, and an interview with an ASL teacher at the University. I also read articles and books that highlighted the current conflict in defining what it means to be deaf.

Short Assignment on The Body Silent:

Campus Map Assignment: I had to wait until I had left the confines of my residence hall before beginning my assignment because I live in a non-handicap accessible room. It's on the second floor of Van Doren Residence Hall, which does not have any elevators. However, the ground floor has a ramp from the lobby to it, so someone in a wheelchair could access that area. After I left I walked along the sidewalk as usual; every corner has little ramps, making it easy to maneuver. I had three classes, and three buildings did not seem like a daunting task at all. In fact it was not for a while. I found the handicap entrance to my first class in Wohlers Hall fairly easily. The only inconvenience was that the entrance happened to be on the opposite side of the building that my classroom was. Then when it was time to leave class I had to walk the length of the building to go down the ramp, and walk the length of the building again outside in order to go in the right direction to my next class in Foellinger Auditorium. I was a little worried about this building because of all the steps in front, but there was an easily accessible ramp on the east side of the building. Once inside I tried to take a shortcut through some doors and encountered a step in my way. I was forced to walk around to the main entrance. Leaving Foellinger Auditorium was simple because going out the way I came in required barely any extra

distance to travel.

As I began to walk to my next class in the main library I realized that I only knew of one way to get to the classroom, which was through a back entrance with a flight of stairs. This might not seem like a big deal, but my class was in Library 66, the infamously difficult to find classroom. The instructors even sent a map of the building before classes started. I walked in the main doors because that was the only ramp I saw. I then proceeded to find an elevator that someone had once told me she used to get down the room. I found the elevator, but before it I found about five steps that I could not ascend. I turned around and went back to an elevator I saw right near the main entrance. There was a worker on the elevator, and I mentioned the project to him. After getting to the basement after the elevator going to all the other floors about twice I asked him how to get to the classroom. He thought for a moment and said he did not know, but that he could take me through a storage backroom where only employees were allowed to enter. I am lucky I met him, otherwise I don't think I would have found my way to class. When I left the classroom I found an elevator right next to it, so I got on and hit the button to take me to the first floor. I was a little upset that I had not found it upstairs earlier, but after getting to the first floor I discovered why I had not found it before; it was the elevator blocked by the stairs. Consequently I could not get out the building in the position I was in. I decided to go to the second floor and try my luck there. I wandered around for a while and eventually found the elevator I used to get to the basement before class. It took me right to the front doors, and I finally escaped from the library.

Overall my journey as a disabled person was not too difficult. The University of Illinois proved to be a generally friendly environment for disabled persons, despite my adventure in the main library. However the fact that the campus remains only generally friendly is a shame; it should be made extremely friendly. Every entrance should be made handicap accessible; no handicap person should have to walk extra just to get to a ramp. Right now it might not seem bad, but in the winter that extra hundred or two hundred feet can seem like a mile, especially in a wheelchair. Also, some of the ramps I scaled were steep, making me wonder how hard it is to push a wheelchair up there. The University of Illinois is a step above many others in the category of accessibility, but it should always be striving to reach higher to benefit those who deserve it the most.

Map:

Document/Image/Artifact from Archive: I chose a document created in 2002 by the Diversity Initiatives Committee labeled as Working Group Recommendations on Disability Access (It was electronically documented in December 2007). The document details what the University strives to do to incorporate disabled persons and disability education into the school. The first section highlights how a more diverse population, including greater numbers of disabled students, would benefit the University. It has four objectives summarized as increasing the number of disabled people on campus, increasing disability awareness, and increasing the prevalence of disability in the University curriculum. It even goes so far as to mention adding a disability related course to the general education requirements. It also discusses American Sign Language as a more in-depth four year program. In addition, the document puts a large emphasis on the incorporation of disabled faculty members as a way to significantly increase student interaction with disabled persons.

I chose this document because it was a good representation of what direction the University would like to head in the incorporation of disabled persons on campus, whether they are faculty or students. I found it interesting that the document never mentioned the physical barriers that disabled students face, but the social and academic barriers. It was focused on what the University can do to assist those who are disabled in terms of getting a better education and becoming more accepted by those around them, not just on campus but in the workplace as well. One of the statements that caught my eye was, "However, a study of UIUC graduates with disabilities from 1952 to 1991 found the salary gap between University of Illinois graduates with disabilities and their able-bodied cohort, when matched for age, gender, and college major and when health status effects were controlled, was statistically insignificant (Hendricks, Schiro-Geist & Broadbent, 1997)." This shows that the University must currently have programs in place to assist disabled graduates secure well-paying jobs. These programs would be a place of further research. You could interview the directors of these programs, look at the articles that document the start of these programs, and talk with the students who have received the service of the programs. It would also be relevant to speak with disabled students who have not yet graduated and find out how they feel about any career guidance they have received so far.

There are many other research paths you could follow after

reading this document. It mentions many programs that the committee deemed important to assist the disabled community. You could follow up to see if any of the programs were implemented, and if so, how successful they have been. The programs included securing a faculty member fluent in American Sign Language to head up the program, creating a central fund to help professors who need to accommodate a disabled student, and incorporating disability into the more general curriculum. It would be fairly easy to browse the course list for courses that have a disability aspect, and speak with the professors who instruct those classes to find out what approach they use when teaching. Also, it may be helpful to talk to professors who have had disabled students to see how easy it was for them to accommodate the student. You could also explore other documents that the Diversity Initiatives Committee has published concerning disability on campus. It has been six years since the publication of this specific document, leaving enough time for programs to develop and other papers to be published. In addition, you could interview those on the committee to see their opinions on the subject of disability and how it relates to diversity at the University. Another research topic could involve McKinley and the UI Counseling Center, which test students who are having academic trouble for psychological conditions. This is a very different form of disability, as it is often less detectable, and therefore may involve less discrimination from the general population versus a person in a wheelchair. The document also provides some URL's that would be good resources to look at. One link goes to a description of the most recent town meeting on disability access, which the document states should be held every 1-3 years. You could look at the origin of these town meetings and what they have contributed to the University and its policies towards the disabled. At the end of the document, the difficulty disabled students face in acquiring accessible course material is mentioned. This is due to professors picking course material and books at the last minute. You could research how the Office of Instructional Resources accommodates these requests and what could be done to improve the process.

This document tells us that the life of the disabled on campus is fairly decent, but it also shows that University officials recognize that it could be greatly improved through many facets. It illustrates the trouble disabled students have to go through to acquire course materials, and often the delays they experience. It also mentions the low amount of scholarships for disabled undergraduate and graduate students. In addition,

it seems that there are not many disabled faculty members, especially in the area of American Sign Language, where a hearing disabled professor would be a great asset. One thing the document does not tell us about the life of the disabled is how the physically disabled manage in their travels across the campus. This document instead focuses on people with various disabilities, which includes those that may not be physical. Although this document was published six years ago, the overall quality of life for the disabled on campus has probably not changed in any dramatic way, but perhaps is smaller, more concentrated ways.

In order to better understand this document it would be helpful to research the Diversity Initiatives Committee in terms of how it was formed and what else it has done on campus, whether it relates to disability or not. This could help you see what other groups the disabled are associated with and the difficulties those groups have encountered in the quest for equality. You should also read the policy guidelines that the State of Illinois has given the University in order to comply with accessibility. These could give you further insight into the motivations of those who wrote the document. Also, the document mentions the ADA, requiring you to fully understand the requirements this document states.

My path to finding this document was fairly easy. I searched under the keyword of disability as a broad topic, in order to look through a wide variety of materials. I was then able to browse the archives online and view the document with Adobe Reader because it had been digitized. It did take a couple searches to find something that really interested me, but it was not a difficult or extremely time consuming task.

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Initial Question: Currently I am interested in exploring the development of the American Sign Language program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I would like to research how and when the program started in addition to how it has grown and changed. I began to think about this subject when I read a document by the Diversity Initiatives Committee named Working Group Recommendations on Disability Access. It mentioned the need for an instructor fluent in American Sign

Language to head the program and guide the curriculum. I became interested in whether these recommendations were actually followed and how well the program is developing. Our discussions in class about Gallaudet also spurred my interest in American Sign Language.

So far I have done research through the University website to see what classes in American Sign Language are offered. The course archives are only available from spring 2000 where there is one course in American Sign Language. By just looking at the catalogs online I was unable to determine when the course was first offered. The old course catalogs also show that the transition from one class to three different levels occurred in spring 2007. In addition I browsed the Speech and Hearing Sciences website and found that the department offers an American Sign Language track contained within the bachelors degree in speech and hearing science. The track requires students to complete the three American Sign Language classes in addition to two deaf culture classes.

In class, Claire has helped me by giving me the names of some professors to contact for interviews. I foresee these people being valuable to my research as they are extremely familiar with the American Sign Language program on campus. They could also lead me to other resources within the department that detail the history of the program. I have visited the archives and found most of the material to be not recent and therefore not very useful to my research. However, I will continue to search on the archives website for articles relative to my topic. I also plan to look through copies of the Daily Illini to see if there are any articles relating to the addition of American Sign Language courses to the University of Illinois curriculum. I would like to see if there are any minutes in meetings that lead to the Working Group Recommendations on Disability Access document. I also think it might be beneficial to speak with the faculty director of the American Sign Language program. Claire also mentioned that there is a RSO Society of Signers that would be interesting to observe and possibly interview.

In doing my research I think that I will encounter barriers because the American Sign Language course development has been very recent and not a lot has been written or recorded about it. There is quite a bit of information written about those with physical disabilities; however there is far less information about those with hearing disabilities on campus. I have already found that the archives are not

extremely useful for research of a more recent time period. Some recent documents have been digitized, but many things have not been archived yet since they are not considered that old. I think that I will have to conduct interviews to collect most of my information, which means it might be difficult to get times scheduled. Also, because I am most likely interviewing those who communicate by signing it might be a challenge to effectively record the interviews.

Source Annotated Bibliography: Klemm, Courtney. "Club tries to advance deaf culture." Daily Illini 14 December 2004, Section: News.

This article describes how the Registered Student Organization Society of Signers was formed by Katie Meyer and what the group is currently doing. The article also says that Dr. David Quinto-Pozos was hired recently to become the head of American Sign Language department, which confirms a statement I found from a 2002 proposal for a doctorate program of audiology that says the department is in the process of hiring a tenure track faculty member with a focus on ASL research. It mentions that a new program will hopefully be installed the next year, letting me know that in 2004 there was not an ASL program. It also mentions that starting in the current year, 2004, members of Society of Signers will advocate for ASL to count towards foreign language requirements. This conflicts with another source I found that was published in 2002 by the Diversity Initiatives Committee that states ASL was approved as a fulfillment of the foreign language requirement.

Klemm, Courtney. "UI student teaches signing, University to make ASL fulfill foreign language

requisite." Daily Illini 10 February 2006, Section: Features.

This article is about sign language lessons given by John Brand III, who was currently a senior at the time of the article. It gives me a source for who pushed for the ASL program, but not how it was in fact implemented. It also gives me insight into how students on campus feel about ASL; however, it could be slightly biased because all the students interviewed were members of Society of Signers, and they do not accurately represent the entire student body. It says Brand was the education coordinator of the Society of Signers, which advocated for ASL as a foreign language. It says an ASL curriculum will be implemented in 2006 or 2007 and then be counted towards fulfilling the foreign language requirement. This timeline follows with the previous article Klemm wrote for the *Daily Illini*, and conflicts with the

Diversity Initiatives Committee publication.

“Proposal for Doctor of Audiology Degree Program.”
University Archives: Series No. 4/2/1, Box 18,

Folder “February 17, 2003”.

The document includes a variety of proposals for how the Doctor of Audiology program will be implemented at the University including the hiring of a “tenure-track faculty... whose primary research area is American Sign Language.” This reveals that the reason for hiring a faculty member fluent in ASL came from interest in a doctorate program, although the classes offered are currently only for undergraduates. The date of the proposal, 2003, also gives a timeline for about how long it took to find and hire that faculty member, which begs the question of why it took about four years for a seemingly simple hire. The document also mentions the doctorate program is needed because of the increasing hard-of-hearing population. This makes me wonder if the authors of the proposal were referring to those that are deaf or those who naturally lose their hearing as they reach old age.

“Course Catalogs” 1982-2007. University Archives: Series No. 25/3/0/1, Boxes 2-4.

The course catalogs from many years reveal when American Sign Language courses were first offered and when the move was made from one level to three levels. It also shows that the first course to include American Sign Language was not focused primarily on ASL, but on all nonverbal communication, including animal communication. I also found it interesting that it originated in the Department of Psychology, but quickly moved to Speech and Hearing Science and Linguistics. It was odd that the American Sign Language course was given for such a long period of time without any expansion to more than one level.

Diversity Initiatives Committee. Working Group Recommendations on Disability Access. University of

Illinois, 2002.

This document names a goal of funding of funding for a tenure-track faculty member in the area of American Sign Language, which coincides with the proposal for the Doctor of Audiology degree saying the next year that it is in the process of looking for that faculty member. This document

goes more in-depth and says that it would be advantageous for the faculty member to be a native ASL user. The document also mentions that ASL has been approved to fulfill the foreign language requirement for general education credits, however at the time only one level of ASL was offered. Also, the Daily Illini articles published in 2004 and 2006 both mention that groups are advocating for ASL to be counted towards general education requirements. This also conflicts with an annual report from the Academic Senate which mentions this push for ASL to be approved as a foreign language.

Committee on Equal Opportunity. EQ.04.01 Annual Report for 2003-04. University of Illinois

Academic Senate, 2003-2004.

This report includes items discussed at length by the Senate during the 2003-2004 term. At the end of the report is a section about the Society of Signers and its efforts to have American Sign Language approved as a second language. This confirms the Daily Illini article from 2004 about the organization and its goals. It also shows that the approval of ASL as a second language was an important topic, as it was forwarded onto the Educational Policy Committee. The forwarding shows that the availability of ASL to students is not so much an equality issue, but an academic one. The date of the report also confirms the timeline formed from all other sources, except for the Diversity Initiatives Committee document.

Revised Question: After doing further research I have come up with the question: “How does the development of the American Sign Language program at the University of Illinois demonstrate its views towards the deaf?” In some of my research I found that the University Senate did not consider the lack of American Sign Language classes an equality issue, but an academic one. However, the American Sign Language track within the Speech and Hearing Science Department includes classes on deaf culture, showing that perhaps the University is moving towards viewing the deaf as a separate culture, versus just having American Sign Language as an educational opportunity. *No Pity* also inspired me to examine this issue because of the chapter on Deaf culture and on the protest at Gallaudet University. This protest seems to gather an accurate view of how people who are deaf view themselves within the American culture. I have to wonder if this view was taken into account when the American Sign Language program was put together.

In order to further pursue my question I am planning on doing at least one interview with an American Sign Language teacher. Right now we are in the process of finding a time that works for both of us. I also plan to do further research in the College of Applied Health Sciences to see why American Sign Language was put into that college versus other foreign languages that are a part of the Liberal Arts and Sciences. This categorization may imply that the University has approved American Sign Language as a foreign language, but does not necessarily consider it one in the same way it views others, such as French or Spanish. In addition, the fact that only three American Sign Language classes are offered and some colleges require four semesters of foreign language to fulfill the requirement might rule it out as an option for some students. Students pursuing the American Sign Language track also cannot count those classes towards their general education requirements, including foreign language. This would be like telling a Spanish major he or she must take three or four semesters of French because the Spanish classes he or she just took count towards their major.

The original source that made me think about American Sign Language was the report by the Diversity Initiatives Committee on disability. It made me wonder whether a tenure-track faculty member had actually been employed since the writing of the document and about the American Sign Language Program here in general. However, I was confused by the document stating that American Sign Language had been approved to fulfill general education requirements in 2002 when I found many sources citing the date at least a couple years later. For this reason I find that the document is not very useful. I feel its authors were not well informed about the state of the American Sign Language program given that the information in the document is probably incorrect and mentioned very briefly. Although it led me to the beginning of my research and my question, I will probably not refer to this document in my paper.

I think that examining the University's view of American Sign Language can illuminate how others across America might view American Sign Language. This will give you a broader look at what progress or lack of progress has been made in the disability movement for people who are deaf. However, it can be difficult to determine progress for a group of people who seem to be torn between becoming fully integrated and keeping their own separate culture and community. As Shapiro mentions in *No Pity*, "Many at

Gallaudet would see mainstreaming as a threat to the separate schools that fostered a sense of deaf identity...” (84).

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Recommendations to Campus Honors Program: Ultimately I would like the Speech and Hearing Science Department to develop a separate major just for ASL. This would include many more levels of ASL because it is extremely difficult to become fluent in any language after taking just three semesters of it. In an interview J3 said that out of about 70 students only five become somewhat fluent. He also recommended that there be more interaction between people who are deaf in the community and students taking the ASL courses. He mentioned that a way to do this would be to have a student live in the home of a person who is deaf that uses ASL. It would be like a study abroad opportunity for the students, except it would be within the local community. Being immersed in the culture of the people who speak the language you are learning, such as ASL, helps you become fluent and truly understand the people. The Department could also sponsor events where the hearing-impaired could speak with the students and help them understand what their day-to-day lives are like. In order to have this expanded program the University would need to hire more faculty members with expertise in ASL. It would be beneficial to have these faculty members be hearing-impaired themselves, such as J3, because they would truly be able to convey the culture of those who are deaf. With this larger program I think the University should shift ASL to the College of LAS and give it its own department, or include it in the linguistics department. Since ASL is now considered a foreign language it should not be housed in a department separate from other foreign languages. Its current position in the College of Applied Health Science makes it seem like it should only be used by those who have a health problem, but it is just like any other language in that it can be used to communicate between any two people, whether they are hearing-impaired or not.